

*Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation
Committee*

**“Labels and Lyrics:
Do Parental Advisory Stickers Inform
Consumers and Parents?”**

*Opening Statement
of Senator Sam Brownback*

Good afternoon. I want to thank my friend and Commerce Committee Chairman John McCain for agreeing to hold this hearing, and facilitating a public forum for a most important public issue.

This is not a legislative hearing. There are no bills to be discussed today. The purpose of today's hearing is informational and investigative.

The title of this hearing is: “Labels and Lyrics: Do Parental Advisory Stickers Inform Consumers and Parents?” The question is an important one. From the first Senate Commerce Committee hearings on this issue back in 1985, parental advisory labels have been touted as the answer to the difficult problem of informing parents and protecting children from violent music lyrics while protecting free speech; it is timely and proper to assess the extent to which these labels have succeeded in doing so.

Certainly, the need to inform parents on music content has never been greater. Over the last several years, there has been a marked increase in

the number of exceptionally violent, brutal, racist, anti-woman songs. Recent best-selling albums have included graphic descriptions of murder, torture and rape. Violence is glamorized, and the debasement of women is celebrated -- often, in the most graphic and obscene terms. I refer your attention to just a few popular songs, the lyrics of which are displayed around the room.

These songs are not merely out on the market, they are topping the charts. All of the songs displayed here have been on the Billboard Top 200. Two of them hit No. 1 on the Billboard chart within the last two months.

These songs are not only hugely popular, they are hugely profitable. Each of these albums enjoys the corporate backing of some of the largest, most prestigious corporations in the world. The parent companies of some of the labels featured here include Seagrams, EMI Corporation, and Polygram.

The record companies that sell these songs of hate may have a right to do so. But they are also responsible -- as we all are -- for their actions and the consequences. The founders of our nation gave us a system of maximum freedom and maximum responsibility. The recording industry, in producing and peddling these songs, have exercised their freedom. They -- indeed, all of us -- must be equally willing to exercise their responsibility. Although these corporations have been criticized for producing and distributing music with violent and misogynistic lyrics, on almost every occasion, industry spokespeople have pointed to the presence of a parental advisory label as a defense.

This Committee first conducted a hearing on parental advisory labels in 1985. Subsequent to those hearings, Tipper Gore and the Parents Music Resource Center, representatives from the Recording Industry Association (RIAA), along with the National PTA and Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) developed a program in which future music

releases by participating companies would feature an advisory label.

This program soon proved to be highly limited in its application. The majority of record labels and companies simply chose not to participate. Even among the companies that did agree to label explicit albums, the standards for determining which albums should be labeled, as well as the form the label took, varied dramatically.

By 1990, several state legislatures were considering legislation to require music labels across the board, which triggered a new round of negotiations between the RIAA, the National Association of Record Merchandisers, and various grassroots groups. From those meetings emerged an agreement that the RIAA would set up standards for the appearance of parental advisory stickers. At this time, all parental advisory stickers are supposed to exactly mirror the industry standard. Deciding which albums get stickered, however, remains an ad hoc process. That decision is left to the album's producers.

There are also inconsistencies in reports on the implementation of the parental advisory sticker program on the retail level. At a hearing I chaired back in November, Hilary Rosen, the President of the Recording Industry Association, who declined our invitation to testify today, made several claims about the parental advisory label program, including:

- Children under the age of 18 are prohibited from purchasing albums with a parental advisory sticker attached.
- All music retail stores carry signs to inform consumers on the meaning of a parental advisory sticker.
- Parents can always return a CD or tape if it contains offensive lyrics, and retailers will take it back.

However, although some stores have a policy of refusing to sell albums that carry a parental advisory sticker to children, anecdotal evidence suggests that this policy is often ignored, particularly since store employees are often themselves under the age of 18. Other stores do not restrict the sale of explicit music to minors.

Perhaps most alarming is that, even while industry executives assert that children are protected from this music, anecdotal evidence suggests that most hyper-violent albums are bought by children. There don't seem to be many Marilyn Manson fans over the age of 20. To deal honestly with the question of the effectiveness of music labels, we may need to consider another, equally important question: Is hyper-violent, misogynistic music marketed to children?

Of course, even the most dedicated industry efforts to inform parents and discourage the sale of explicit music to minors will be infringed from time to time. But the question remains whether selling -- and marketing -- explicit music to minors is the exception, or the rule.

The RIAA has refused to testify this morning. As the organization responsible for designing, publicizing, and enforcing the use of the parental advisory sticker, the RIAA has been the most vocal proponent of the parental advisory sticker program, such as it is. It is disappointing that they would refuse the invitation to discuss this issue today.

However, we do have a very distinguished panel of witnesses before us. I'd like to introduce them, and then hear from the other distinguished members of this Committee.

Witness List

Panel 1

Charlie Gilreath (pronounced "Gil-reeth") is the editor-in-chief of

Entertainment Monitor magazine, a magazine aimed at providing parents with full information about popular entertainment.

Debbie Pelley is a teacher at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas.

Panel 2

Krist Novoselic (pronounced “No-vo-sah-lech”) is the President of the Joint Artists and Music Promotions Action Committee (JAMPAC) and former member of the well-known alternative group Nirvana.

Panel 3

Dr. George Gerbner: Dr. Gerbner is the Bell Atlantic Professor of Communications at Temple University, former Dean of the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, and the author of many well-known books on the mass media and media influence.

Barbara Wyatt is the President and Executive Director of the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC). The PMRC, once led by Tipper Gore and Susan Baker, was instrumental in encouraging the labeling of music with violent or sexually explicit lyrics.